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SUBJECT: IMEDI STRUGGLES AND SUSPENDS OPERATIONS

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Imedi TV voluntarily ceased operation shortly after 20:00 hrs on December 26, 2007. This was a decision of News Corp management after 16 key Imedi journalists announced their resignations in the aftermath of the release of a number of video and audio tapes in which Badri Patarkatsishvili, Imedi owner and opposition presidential candidate, is allegedly implicated in a coup plot. However, Imedi's head of public and political programs, Giorgi Targamadze, in a live television broadcast publicly blamed the closure on government pressure. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Imedi's current closure was announced in a staged tableau with Giorgi Targamadze, the head of public and political programs, and Bidzina Baratashvili, general director, sitting side-by-side at a table in front of some 20 Imedi journalists crowded into an Imedi studio. Giorgi Targamadze stated on live television that Imedi was temporarily suspending broadcasts due to "pressure and blackmail" on the part of authorities. He said the government's accusations against Badri Patarkatsishvili "have put the television station staff in an extremely difficult situation." Targamadze assured the public that the channel would be back on air in the New Year, together with a change in the station's ownership. "We are thinking of ways to save the channel. One option is to transfer 100 per cent of the shares ... to another owner. This could be to a creative group of the TV station's personnel or to persons who are well-known and respected by the public and our traditional partner the News Corporation." (Note: Without a change in ownership, many journalists say they will not return to the station.)

¶3. (SBU) After Targamadze's speech, reporter Merab Metreveli stepped out from the crowd of journalists, grabbed the mike from Targamadze, and said, also speaking for the other journalists: "It's unacceptable for us, as for every other normal person, when Interior Ministry representatives tried to commission a Chechen to murder Badri Patarkatsishvili. On the other hand, the methods Patarkatsishvili wanted to use to come to power are also categorically unacceptable."

¶4. (SBU) The most well-known faces of Imedi TV, leading reporters, anchors, technicians and administrative staff, have now left the channel. The brain drain started in the wake of the November 7 shutdown when Inga Grigolia, the popular anchor of the Reaktsia talk show, left because of "Badri Patarkatsishvili's publicly stated desire to run for presidency." Earlier in the afternoon of December 26, six journalists from Imedi's most popular show, Droeba, called a press conference to announce why they quit the station: "Badri Patarkatsishvili, the founder of our TV company and a candidate in the presidential election, has been at the center of recent developments. It is unacceptable for us to continue working at Imedi TV, because even our journalistic freedom can now be misused."

¶5. (SBU) The public has generally reacted favorably to this second closure of Imedi. Most representatives of the Georgian media and public called the decision of the Droeba journalists "a painful

step, but the only right step," and "an adequate reaction to the exposure of Badri Patarkatsishvili's true intentions." Some journalists said "I would do the same not to become a tool in Badri's hands," while a few thought the Droeba crew needed to "provide a better justification for their decision" or even that "it was an emotional, but unprofessional decision."

¶16. (SBU) Government figures emphasized they had no role in the closure, and the Prime Minister stated that he was in contact with News Corp Executive Vice President Marty Pompadour to find out News Corp's plans for Imedi TV. Meanwhile, Opposition figures generally insist that Imedi TV only suspended its broadcast due to government pressure.

¶17. (SBU) Many observers feel that this action by Imedi journalists represents a breakthrough in the professionalism of the Georgian media that will serve to liberate other media from political pressure. Lasha Tugushi, editor-in-chief of daily Resonance said that "the time has come for media to self-regulate and to be self-critical." Observers praised the professional ethics of Imedi journalists, with the exception of Targamadze whose live statement was perceived as unbalanced, and pure political theater. In private conversations with the Embassy, Droeba journalists shared their concerns that Targamadze's actions went beyond acceptable journalistic standards, but, rather, reflected the behavior of a politician.

¶18. (SBU) Comment. Since its initial reopening on December 12, Imedi TV has been careful to be more balanced in its reporting even though their owner is a candidate for the presidency. But the latest revelations concerning Patarkatsishvili seem to have made this closure necessary, in the opinion of News Corp. It is now essential that the government of Georgia not be perceived as having shut Imedi down. Many in Georgia are now waiting for some comment from News Corp. End Comment.

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